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ABSTRACT

Factors that influence the quality of higher education at Mississippi State University are considered. Quality in higher education is influenced by the background and competence of the faculty and staff, the kinds of students enrolled in programs, resources available, past history, and the current reputation of the university. Mississippi's system of reimbursement for a university's programs does not consider quality but is a credit driven formula. It is suggested that the board of trustees should alter the formula to acknowledge the time and effort faculty invest in doctoral programs. Efforts to increase institutional production of student credit hours, faculty loads, and credit hours per student could generate funds to support existing programs. Resources are needed to encourage innovation and promote enriching activities for students and faculty. Additional areas that pertain to educational quality include: improving the student advising system and increasing the kind and quality of interaction with students; increasing the use of library resources and making courses more challenging; encouraging alumni to be concerned about the university's academic programs; improving support services; promoting high institutional morale to create a positive climate for teaching, research, and service; defining/refining indices of quality in each discipline; and allowing for different kinds of expectations for departments. It is suggested that institutional quality and reputations are developed over a sustained period of time and that regional and national reputations are based on a university's programs in graduate education and research. (SW)

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# ENHANCING THE QUALITY OF TEACHING, RESEARCH, AND SERVICE AT MISSISSIPPI STATE UNIVERSITY

**Presented to the Faculty of Mississippi State University Attending A Staff Development Conference**

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**James D. McComas**

**Mississippi State University**

**Lake Tiak O'Khata, Louisville, Mississippi**
**Saturday, August 22, 1981**

HE 014 498

# Enhancing the Quality of Teaching, Research, and Service at Mississippi State University

Quality in higher education is an appropriate topic for our meeting today. It is also a difficult and complex dimension which is not easily specified, measured, and achieved; for a variety of variables influence it. Recent editorials in Mississippi have made this topic a continuing theme, most usually with a focus on duplication of programs and the negative impact believed to result from duplication at the eight state universities.

Quality in higher education is influenced by the background and competence of the faculty and staff, the kinds of students enrolled in programs, the resources available, past history, and the current reputation of the university. It is paradoxical that within recent years groups and governmental bodies have focused on quality while at the same time they have been looking for ways of reducing funding levels for the very programs they wish to see improved.

In preparing today's paper for our visit together, I have found it a much more difficult assignment than the one a year ago concerning trends in higher education. I also have concluded that it would be helpful if each faculty member and every administrator would develop a working paper concerning this topic. Perhaps a university colloquium can be scheduled during the year with local and outside resources to explore this matter in greater depth. I would hope that you would consider my paper today as a beginning draft which needs additional research, synthesis, and greater specificity.

I would like to share with you some tentative assumptions, observations, and some institutional considerations which relate to the topic.

**Scholarship and Quality Raise Questions.**

Universities always have been concerned with scholarship. Questions which should be included as we consider scholarship are these: What is it? How is it demonstrated and measured? How is it rewarded? These questions suggest that it is not a simple consideration. Scholarship is multidimensional in nature and may be demonstrated through teaching, research, and service. It is demonstrated by faculty and students, and a primary goal of administration should be to enhance scholarship. A basic definition of scholarship focuses on the qualities of learning.

Do all disciplines and all professions provide comparable opportunities for scholarship? Can the level of scholarship in various disciplines and professions be compared? Do all disciplines and professions lend themselves to equal application of scientific analyses, quantification, and measurement? Is it possible for a professor who is in a discipline which is less precise to be more scholarly than one whose discipline allows for control of variables and environment?

Quality of a university is enhanced when members of the academic community develop a mutual appreciation for the diversity present and the contributions which each makes to the life of the university. For example, if a university believes that the

general education component is of paramount importance, it will assign its best faculty and institutional resources to insure quality.

Just as there should be no unimportant people within a university, every department has an important role to play and contributions to make in the life of a university. The value of a department or college cannot always be measured in terms of the starting salaries of its graduates, the number of students, the cost of instruction per credit hour, or the economic and political influence of alumni.

Some faculty and staff members in disciplines and professional areas have a short memory when they experience increased attention and increases in enrollments. Often these same disciplines or professional areas have been protected to a degree during less populous periods because the faculty and programs provide contributions which are in the university's best interests. A department faculty which has some stability and continuity is essential to the development and maintenance of quality programs. Unlike automobile plants, university departments do not lend themselves to quick startups and closingsdown of "assembly lines."

In some cases, faculty and administrators are more committed to their specialty than to their institution. I believe that quality cannot be purchased alone through attracting competent faculty, administrators, and staff. Our university is fortunate to have the present level of commitment from you and from our staff. It is important to remember that we cannot expect faculty and staff members to make a commitment to the university unless there is a commitment to faculty and staff by the institution. For example, term contracts which preclude tenure may be interpreted as an absence of institutional commitment by some. Our extended waiting period for tenure for experienced faculty still creates a hardship in attracting key personnel. This is Board policy, and some relief was gained last year.

**Institutional Quality and Reputations are Developed Over a Sustained Period of Time.**

Unlike manufactured products, the results of higher education cannot always be assessed as a business or industrial model. However, even in business and industry, time is a factor in developing, testing, and, perhaps more importantly, developing a reputation for the product. We can recall that when the first Japanese cameras and automobiles were marketed in this country, there were many questions about quality, quality control, and reputation. Within the last twenty years we have seen Japanese cars not only outstrip other imports in the automobile industry, but make serious inroads on the American automotive industry with their compact models. These products have developed a good reputation, but it took time and effort.

One may observe that leading institutions, both public and private, are among the oldest in the nation: Harvard, Chicago, Stanford, Cornell, Vanderbilt, Virginia, University of North Carolina, Illinois, Michigan, Wisconsin, and Minnesota are examples. Correspondingly, agriculture and engineering are very old and strong programs within our own university.

**A Commitment from the Larger Community is a Necessary Ingredient.**

At least thirty years ago a number of people in the state of Georgia, including the governor and legislature, made a commitment to develop a university of excellence. The results are quite clear today as the University of Georgia has become one of the leading universities in the South and indeed in the Nation. *Resources over a*

*sustained period of time* have been available to enhance the quality of existing programs and to develop new ones at a highly competitive level.

**Concern for Quality Must Originate from Within.**

The commitment to develop a high quality institution in Georgia did not originate outside the university. President O. C. Aderhold, concerned faculty, trustees, key alumni, and others had to conceive what might be possible and then begin to share and sell those plans to key leaders of the state. The progress of any university is a result of collective rather than single efforts. The attitudes, aspirations, values, competence, and commitment we each demonstrate combine to influence quality. For example, even in the best department within an institution there often is a considerable range within the faculty in the quality of teaching, research, and service. In my opinion it is important that we make a strong commitment to quality in the activities which each of us is responsible for, whether it be administration or instruction, research or public service. Our effectiveness is influenced in a variety of ways and sometimes is limited by things over which we have little or no control. But the question remains. "Am I performing my role at the highest possible level of quality, given the present setting and conditions?"

**Land-Grant Universities Bear Peculiar Relations to Quality.**

The philosophy and practice of land-grant universities are unique when compared with private universities and those state universities which have been highly selective in the recruiting of students. Some states require state universities to admit all graduates from accredited high schools in their states. The early history of land-grant universities, and indeed the enabling act, focused on the laboring and industrial classes of our society.

Peoples' University is often a synonym for land-grant. By their very nature land-grant universities are expected to perform unique and specific roles and missions with a broad range of our population. Historically, universities such as ours have made a much greater commitment toward service and toward taking selected campus programs to the people of the state.

The appeal of land-grant universities has attracted a broad and diverse student population. Such institutions generally have leaned toward a concept of open rather than highly selective admissions. If a land-grant university (or any university for that matter) wishes to improve quality, one consideration is to become more restrictive regarding those who may attend. Selective admissions insure an institution of a better prepared and more homogeneous student population, capable of being taught with less effort. It is quite clear that it is much easier for a university to tighten its admission requirements during periods when student enrollment is increasing rather than declining. Another approach might be to place an extra emphasis on high quality students without an official change in entrance requirements.

**Credit Driven Formula Funding is a Factor.**

The basis of reimbursement for a university's programs must be recognized when admissions criteria are being considered. Unfortunately, our system of reimbursement does not consider quality but rather is a credit driven formula. By its very nature, if ways are found to reduce the cost of a program one year, the next year reimbursement will be reduced and economies gained will be negated. Our state

formula in Mississippi does not differentiate between master's and doctoral level courses and does not acknowledge the investment of time and effort of the major professor who serves as adviser for the thesis or dissertation.

**A Bottom-Line Philosophy May Focus on Short-Term Results.**

Universities can employ good business practices in the use of many of their resources. It is apparent that most have improved in this area within recent years. However, the misapplication of economic models in colleges and universities has focused many times on efficiency at the very expense of quality. One can operate and administer a university just about as cheaply as anyone wishes. However, if the preoccupation and almost exclusive focus remain on management and efficiency alone, then we will experience sharp declines in quality. Over time, one cannot have an extraordinary university with ordinary resources. We must always be concerned with efficiency, but we must move our focus to quality and work more vigorously to identify what it is, why it is important, and how we hope to attain it. Such an approach calls for an investment rather than an immediate payoff.

Ways, then, must be found of raising the aspiration levels of our alumni, the public, and the legislature. Unless the leaders of a state want quality and are willing to pay for it, progress is not possible.

**A Good Library and Computer Center are Essential.**

The best known universities have the finest libraries and computer capabilities. The development of an outstanding library takes institution-wide commitment to it and to the computer center as well. It is the faculty that must develop and maintain expectations and practices which result in maximum use of the facilities and resources available. Can a student pass a course without regular attendance in class, perhaps by reading only the text and notes taken by those attending class?

I recall one accrediting agency's visiting team which did a cursory analysis regarding the use of the library at a certain university The results of that analysis were embarrassing. How well acquainted faculty are with the holdings in their and related areas will likely influence how much and how well students use these holdings. Are we a library conscious university?

The computer has become so commonplace in American higher education that it is often viewed as a part of general education requirements at many universities. Microcomputers are available at reasonable costs and are becoming a part of the laboratory resources being provided in our better elementary and secondary schools.

**Quality is Difficult to Achieve Without Interaction Between Students and Faculty Members.**

I am not sure what a longitudinal study of the interaction between faculty and students would reveal. I have found that one can learn a considerable amount of information about his or her university by calling one's own office and those of others on the campus. A couple of years ago I dialed a department directly to speak with a faculty member only to have the secretary tell me that, "Doctor _____ does not come in on Tuesdays and Thursdays." I am aware that on most campuses, and perhaps even on our own, there are some instances of great injustices to students resulting from the absence of counsel, insufficient information, or, in a small number of cases, incorrect and improper advice. Too, it is disturbing to learn that in some

cases secretaries are signing slips which permit students to take overloads. Most students do not require vast amounts of adviser time in making choices of courses or curricula; but when they do, it is critical that they receive it. Most universities can improve the quality of advising.

While I am not certain as to the level of accessibility of faculty to students, I believe that most faculty members are more approachable than their counterparts of several years ago. I am convinced that the quality of instruction is likely to be raised when the professor strives for a considerable amount of interaction during and outside class. Results of research with high risk students indicate that when efforts are made to know students' names, retention and success are enhanced.

Many of us have been influenced by reading great books, but we have been influenced more by that great professor who encouraged us, yes even demanded that we read those books! I am convinced more every day that one of the great strengths of this university is the positive feeling and warmth that its students have for Mississippi State. We simply cannot afford to lose this very real element.

**The Philosophy and the Kind of Services Provided by Support Personnel Influence Quality.**

Having had experiences in negotiating differences among and between support, academic, and administrative personnel, I have become more aware of the fact that support personnel help shape the image and help set the tone for a university. All of us know of instances where the actions of a secretary, admissions or housing clerk, someone in the registrar's office, or someone in one of our business offices have not reflected favorably upon the university. An insensitive and improperly trained staff member is costly to the university. Such individuals often cost faculty members, students, and administrators valuable time in remediation which could be better spent in teaching and learning. More effective ways must be sought to recognize the efforts of support personnel and to let them know how important they are to institutional quality.

**Institutional Morale is a Factor.**

While it may be difficult to measure, I believe that high institutional morale creates a positive climate for teaching, research, and service. Perhaps we know of instances where an unhappy faculty member has taken up large amounts of class time during a semester because of some personal grievance, dissatisfaction, or bias. While I am sure that we have many individual and institutional concerns, I am grateful for the spirit which exists on this campus.

**Reputation Influences Quality and Vice Versa.**

While institutional halos and quality are not always congruent, they do have an influence on each other. Some well-known universities with strong academic programs in some areas often cause the public to conclude that all programs within the university are strong, when at times they may be rather ordinary. Yet, if good students continue to think that a program is good and enroll in it, their perceptions may help to improve the quality of programs. By the same token, some young programs may be of very good quality but may not be very well known.

**Institutional Reputation is at Regional and National Levels.**

The reputation of a university at the regional and national levels is based on its programs in graduate education and research. These are often valued least by the typical citizen. Certainly the quality of research and research skills of the professor influence the quality of graduate research. Perhaps it is a strong and unpopular position, but consideration should be given to current and past involvement of *major* advisers in research. Those no longer demonstrating their own research skills should be permitted to serve as members of doctoral committees but not as major professors. I want to commend one dean on this campus who insists on reading a dissertation before he signs the page which implies that he has read and approved it.

There is evidence from time to time that dissertation research topics are more and more being selected on the basis of time needed for completion and convenience of study rather than the significance of the topic being researched. There is evidence to suggest that those professors who require less of their students attract the marginal ones. (In other words, the student who hopes to complete his or her dissertation with minimal effort will know the professor in the department who is less demanding.)

To be sure, a competitive stipend must be offered if high quality graduate students are to be attracted. One measure of good graduate programs is their ability to attract students from all areas of the country.

Most universities have not done a very good job of communicating research projects and results to the *general* public. Those in public relations may not know of a potential story or TV clip unless they are alerted by someone in the area of research. Many people within our own university are not aware of the research being conducted in our flight laboratory, high voltage laboratory, wood products, in small towns, marine biology, genetics, catfish, and reading. The ability to communicate to the general public the range and quality of research influences the level of support which can be gained from both state and national levels.

**Qualitative Indices Are Limited.**

How does the university demonstrate how good it is? How would we tell a layman or a legislator just how good our department is or how good programs are in entomology, history, mechanical engineering, architecture, or accounting? We could talk about the qualifications and experience of the faculty, the placement and salaries earned by our graduates, and those in positions of prestige or leadership. We could list publications of our faculty, their leadership in regional and national organizations, their records in research, and national and international honors. But are these measures sufficient to have an impact on the layman, members of the Board of Trustees, the legislature, and others?

Each department must accept the challenge of helping to identify indices of quality which can be communicated to laymen.

**There are Differing Kinds of Expectations for Departments.**

The university which has precisely the same kinds of expectations for different departments may be limiting their quality. What kinds of teaching, research, and service assignments should be made in departments which offer doctoral programs and which are heavily involved in research, in those which offer the master's, and in those which offer only the bachelor's degree? What kinds and levels of scholarship

and research should be required of faculty in a department which offers only the bachelor's degree? How should these expectations differ from those held for faculty in doctoral granting, research oriented departments?

**Image and Entry Level Influence Quality of Students Attracted to a Discipline or Profession.**

We recently held a statewide conference in which all state and private institutions, the State Department of Education, and the public schools were represented. The purpose of the conference was to determine what could be done to improve the selection and education of teachers and how basic skills might be improved in the public schools. One of the challenges faced today is the difference in the market place. Engineers with bachelor's degrees are now earning $25,000 per year, and graduates in the field of business each often earn $19,000. Beginning teachers with bachelor's degrees earn about $11,500. Outstanding female students who were once limited to teaching and a small number of other occupations now find practically every field and profession open to them. The potential beginning salaries of those with bachelor's degrees in arts and sciences in professions such as journalism are $9,000 to $10,000.

Those disciplines or professions which are attracting large numbers of students often wish to be more selective of those who may major in their departments or colleges. Those universities which have limited funds, with credit-hour driven formulas, and little flexibility in the allocation of resources must consider the implications of unplanned changes in admission criteria and the impact of lost revenues when these changes reduce the number of students who may be admitted. The level of support and quality of popular programs may suffer with enrollment declines in other areas.

The [illegible] *unplanned* alteration of admission standards of only a couple of points could have the following consequences:

1). Increasing the requirements for admission by two points on the ACT score may reduce the level of income and allow fewer dollars for popular fields. (Some 1400 students now enrolled would not be eligible to be at Mississippi State University.)

2). Certain departments and colleges would be sharply affected and reassignment of faculty would not be possible. Those fields paying the least would likely suffer most.

3). Minority student populations would be reduced. Exempting black students from increases required on the ACT would likely engender hostility, and the state would not be able to come into compliance with federal court orders.

4). Unless other universities had similar requirements, political and emotional problems could arise where the children of alumni might be eligible for admission at a rival school and not at their alma mater. In many states this would not be a problem of great magnitude, but we all know that in Mississippi emotions run high in such matters.

**The Cost of Litigation is Increasing.**

The university's legal costs and costs associated with appeals and grievances are increasing at a rapid rate. We have been fortunate that the courts have ruled favorably on those cases which have been tested. However, every appeal with the

university, every hearing, every court case costs us in both time and money. I would estimate that one grievance which was filed cost us at least $20,000 (excluding faculty and staff time) and now that the case is in court may cost us another $20,000 to $30,000 even if the courts rule in favor of the university.

We can save the university time and money in some instances by being careful to document evidence to support what we do, and we can become more skillful in handling individual cases which may discourage filing of appeals, grievances, and court cases. Money and time used in responding to such matters reduce the time and money which can be spent on matters which enhance institutional quality.

**Summary.**

I have attempted to identify a number of factors which influence the quality of higher education. I am certain that you can add to the list. It should be emphasized again that we must seek to define and refine indices of quality in each discipline and professional area which can be communicated to students and the general public. Our indicators are too vague and general in many instances.

Our overall goal in working together must be to help the university to achieve its potential, given the resources which are available. I would be less than candid with you if I did not admit that the real challenge we face today is to maintain the quality which now exists throughout the university. But we cannot even do this unless we take advantage of every opportunity to provide the very best possible climate for teaching, research, and service.

We must find ways of convincing the Board of Trustees to alter the formula to recognize the time and effort invested in doctoral programs.

We must seek ways to increase institutional production of student credit hours, faculty loads, and credit hours per student. To do so will make more money available to support existing programs.

We must find ways to make some resources available which will allow some enriching activities for students and faculty. Would our university be viewed less conservative and less traditional if departments and colleges had some extra resources from time to time to try new approaches? Our limited resources probably have discouraged innovation at times.

We can and must find ways with existing resources to improve our system of student advising and increase the kind and quality of interaction with students.

We can identify multiple ways of encouraging more extensive use of library resources. We can find ways of making our courses more interesting and more challenging.

Those of us who are administrators can and must analyze how we spend our time. We must be able to recognize quality where it is found and provide the environment which will cause it to grow.

We must find ways of inspiring our alumni to be as concerned about our university's academic programs as they are excited about our football program. I recall a sign which defined "average" as the top of the bottom and the bottom of the top!

In conclusion, I feel that I am more fortunate than most presidents whom I know because of the support, encouragement, and - at times when you may not realize it - the inspiration you provide. Such was the case this summer when we faced the difficult task of reducing our expenditures by $3 million with $1.5 million coming from academic support areas. I do not know of any university community which has ever responded any more positively to a negative problem than you did this summer.

We are determined to recover the budgetary losses we have experienced. Our university has a lot going for it. We must keep the momentum we have. With extra efforts and some extra resources we will show growth and quality.

With your help we will build an even better Mississippi State University.